

**Detection of Accelerant Products
in Motor Vehicle Arson: Background Study
and Interpretation of Positive Results**

By

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**A thesis
submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Science)**

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Certificate of Authorship and Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as acknowledged within the text.

I certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.



Karen.L.Cavanagh-Steer

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Table of Contents

Certificate of Authorship and Originality	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures.....	ix
Publications and Presentations	xiii
Abstract.....	xiv
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 The Incidence of Arson.....	4
1.3 Motor Vehicle Fires	6
1.4 The Interpretation of Evidence.....	8
1.5 The Use of Accelerants	9
1.6 Transfer and Persistence	10
1.7 Research Aims	11
1.8 References.....	13
Chapter 2. Carpet as a Matrix	17
2.1 Introduction.....	17
2.2 Carpet as a Matrix.....	17
2.3 Pyrolysis: The Process	19
2.4 Background Interference.....	21
2.5 Retention Properties.....	24
2.6 Comparison Samples.....	25
2.7 Conclusions.....	26
2.8 References.....	27
Chapter 3. Samples and Studies	31
3.1 General	31
3.2 Sample Types.....	31
3.2.1 <i>Samples of Unknown History</i>	31
3.2.2 <i>Samples of Known History</i>	33
3.2.3 <i>Transfer and Persistence Studies</i>	35
3.2.3.1 Experiment 1 - Sydney.....	35
3.2.3.2 Experiment 2 - Darwin.....	37
3.2.3.3 Experiment 3 – Combined Transfer and Persistence Study.....	38
3.3 Evaporated Petrol Standards	40
3.4 References.....	42

Chapter 4. Laboratory Materials And Methods	43
4.1 Examination of Collected Samples	43
4.2 Passive Headspace Concentration	43
4.2.1 Adsorption	45
4.2.2 Elution	46
4.3 Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry	47
4.3.1 Instrumentation	48
4.3.1.1 Samples prior to 2001	48
4.3.1.2 Samples analysed from 2001	49
4.3.2 Data Analysis	50
4.4 Burning of Unknown History Samples	51
4.5 Contamination	53
4.6 Linearity and Limits of Detection	54
4.7 References	56
Chapter 5. Laboratory Survey	60
5.1 General	60
5.2 Laboratory Selection	60
5.3 Survey Design	60
5.4 Survey Results	61
5.4.1 Investigative Activities	61
5.4.2 Sample Containers	62
5.4.3 Sample Storage	62
5.4.4 Sample Preparation Techniques	63
5.4.5 Instrumental Techniques	63
5.4.6 ASTM Standards and Guidelines	64
5.4.7 Quality Control Measures	64
5.4.8 Sample Types	65
5.4.9 Accelerants	65
5.5 Conclusions	65
5.6 References	66
Chapter 6. Unknown History Samples	67
6.1 Carpet/Mat Population	67
6.2 Make Of Vehicle Distribution	69
6.3 Analytical Results	71
6.3.1 Analytical Results – Original Unburnt State	84
6.3.1.1 Effect of Substrate Type – Unburnt Samples	84
6.3.1.2 Effect Of Sample Location – Unburnt Samples	86
6.3.2 Analytical Results - Burnt State	87
6.3.2.1 Effect of Substrate Type – Burnt Samples	88
6.3.2.2 Effect of Burning on Profile	89
6.4 Matrix Interference	90
6.5 Target Compounds	91
6.6 Petrol	92
6.6.1 Effect of Vehicle Make on Presence of Petrol	96
6.6.2 Significance of Finding Petrol on Carpet/Mat Samples	96
6.7 Common Compounds	98

6.8	Conclusion	99
6.9	References	100
Chapter 7. Known History Studies		101
7.1	General	101
7.2	Results - Background Interference	101
7.2.1	<i>Background Interference - Preliminary Study Samples</i>	101
7.2.2	<i>Background Interference - Major Study Samples</i>	105
7.3	Results – New Compounds	117
7.3.1	<i>New Compounds – Preliminary Study</i>	117
7.3.2	<i>New Compounds – Major Study</i>	119
7.3.2.1	Number of New Compounds	120
7.3.2.2	Presence of New Compounds and Insertion Position	125
7.3.2.3	Presence of New Compounds and Vehicle Refuelling	127
7.3.2.4	Presence Of New Compounds And Insertion Period	128
7.4	Target Compounds	130
7.4.1	<i>Preliminary Study</i>	130
7.4.2	<i>Major Study</i>	133
7.5	Discussion	137
7.6	Conclusion	139
7.7	References	140
Chapter 8. Transfer and Persistence Studies		141
8.1	General	141
8.2	Evaporated Petrol Standards	141
8.3	Results - Background Interference	142
8.3.1	<i>Sydney Persistence Study Samples</i>	143
8.3.2	<i>Darwin Persistence Study Samples</i>	145
8.3.3	<i>Transfer and Persistence Study Samples</i>	147
8.4	Results – Persistence Studies	150
8.4.1	<i>Sydney Persistence Study</i>	150
8.4.2	<i>Darwin Persistence Study</i>	156
8.5	Results – Transfer And Persistence Study	161
8.6	Discussion	164
8.7	Conclusions	167
8.8	References	168
Chapter 9. Final Conclusions		169
Appendix 1: Known History Study Vehicle Log		173
Appendix 2: Laboratory Survey Form		174
Appendix 3: Major Known History Study		180

List of Tables

Chapter 1

Table 1.1	Australian National Offence Index	2
Table 1.2	Summary of Arson Costs	3
Table 1.3	Incidence of Arson in Australia from 1991 to 1996	4
Table 1.4	NSW Arson Clearance Rates.....	6
Table 1.5	Vehicles Stolen and Recovered Burnt in NSW, WA & SA, July 03 – June 04.....	7

Chapter 3

Table 3.1	Sydney Persistence Study Parameters.....	36
Table 3.2	Darwin Persistence Study Parameters.....	38
Table 3.3	Combined Transfer and Persistence Study Parameters.....	40
Table 3.4	Evaporated Petrol Standards.....	41

Chapter 4

Table 4.1	Operating Parameters for pre-2001 Samples.....	48
Table 4.2	Operating Parameters for Samples analysed from 2001	49
Table 4.3	Unleaded Petrol Target Compounds for Identification.....	50
Table 4.4	Standard Solution Concentrations.....	55

Chapter 5

Table 5.1	Relationship between Climate and Storage Temperature Preference.....	63
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Chapter 6

Table 6.1	Distribution of Carpet Samples by Position.....	67
Table 6.2	Distribution of Mat Samples by Position	67
Table 6.3	Comparison of Australian Population Vehicle Make Distribution and Sample Distribution.....	69
Table 6.4	Summary of Unknown Sample Analysis.....	72
Table 6.5	Type of Substrate and Analytical Result Obtained – Unburnt Samples.....	84
Table 6.6	Carpet/Mat Sample Location and Analytical Result	86
Table 6.7	Type of Substrate and Analytical Result Obtained – Burnt Samples	88

Table 6.8	Effect of Burning and Analytical Result Obtained for Burnt Samples.....	90
Table 6.9	Summary of Vehicle Make and Presence of Petrol for Unburnt Samples.....	96
Table 6.10	Calculation of Confidence Intervals.....	97
Table 6.11	Major Compounds in Background Profiles.....	99

Chapter 7

Table 7.1	Background Chromatographic Profile and Physical Appearance of Preliminary Known History Study Carpet Mats.....	104
Table 7.2	Background Chromatographic Profile and Physical Appearance of Major Known History Study Carpet Mats	111
Table 7.3	Preliminary Known History Study Sample Results.....	117
Table 7.4	Major Known History Study Sample Result	121
Table 7.5	Analytical Results for each Mat Insertion Position.....	126
Table 7.6	Summary of Number of New Compounds per Insertion Period.....	129
Table 7.7	Number of Mats Exhibiting New Target Compounds not Present on Initial Profile.....	134

Chapter 8

Table 8.1	Temperature and Humidity Conditions during Sydney Persistence Study	156
Table 8.2	Darwin Persistence Study Results.....	157
Table 8.3	Interference in Darwin Persistence Study Padding Samples.....	160
Table 8.4	Temperature and Humidity Conditions during Darwin Persistence Study.....	161
Table 8.5	Petrol Transfer and Persistence Study Results.....	162
Table 8.6	Temperature and Humidity Conditions during Sydney Transfer and Persistence Study.....	164

List of Figures

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1	Typical Common Carpet Construction.....	18
Figure 2.2	Random Main Chain Scission Mechanism.....	19
Figure 2.3	Side Group Scission Mechanism	20
Figure 2.4	Depolymerisation Mechanism.....	20

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1	Typical placement of feet by passenger.....	32
Figure 3.2	Sydney Persistence Study Workstation.....	37

Chapter 4

Figure 4.1	DFLEX [®] device obtained from ALBRAYCO Laboratories.....	45
Figure 4.2	Chromatogram of Fresh Unleaded Petrol, Indicating Target Compounds.....	50
Figure 4.3	Radiant Panel Test Chamber.....	52

Chapter 5

Figure 5.1	Access Database of Survey Results	61
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Chapter 6

Figure 6.1	Unknown History Sample Substrate Type and Position.....	67
Figure 6.2	Make of Vehicle Distribution in Sample Population.....	70
Figure 6.3	Make of Vehicle Distribution in Australian Population.....	70
Figure 6.4	Background Profiles of Unknown History Samples in their Unburnt, Original State.....	84
Figure 6.5	Substrate Type and Analytical Result Obtained for Samples in their Unburnt, Original State	85
Figure 6.6	Chromatographic Profiles of Unknown History Samples after Burning.....	87
Figure 6.7	Substrate Type and Analytical Result Obtained for Samples in Burnt State.....	89
Figure 6.8	TIC Chromatogram Of Car Mat Sample 78 Showing Significant Matrix Interference.....	91

Figure 6.9	Chromatographic Profile of Samples Exhibiting Numerous Target Compounds.....	92
Figure 6.10	Comparison of the background chromatographic profile of Unknown History Sample 5 with the profile of 60% Evaporated Petrol Standard.....	94
Figure 6.11	Typical Chromatographic Profile of Unknown History Samples containing Petrol.....	94
Figure 6.12	Comparison of the Extracted Ion Chromatograms of 60% and 90% Evaporated Petrol, with that of Unknown History Sample 71.....	95

Chapter 7

Figure 7.1	Carpet Mat Chromatographic Profile C1.....	102
Figure 7.2	Carpet Mat Chromatographic Profile C2.....	103
Figure 7.3	Carpet Mat Chromatographic Profile C3.....	104
Figure 7.4	Chromatographic profile of Mat 71, after insertion for 6 weeks, and mirror image Chromatogram of Mat 71 background before insertion (Profile C3).....	105
Figure 7.5	Carpet Mat Chromatographic Profile C4 – High Intensity.....	107
Figure 7.6	Carpet Mat Chromatographic Profile C4 – Low Intensity	107
Figure 7.7	Carpet Mat Chromatographic Profile C5 – High Intensity.....	108
Figure 7.8	Carpet Mat Chromatographic Profile C5 – Low Intensity.....	108
Figure 7.9	Extracted Ion Chromatograms Comparing Chromatographic Profiles of 25% Evaporated Petrol, Known History Study Car Mat 557 with Profile C5, and 50% Evaporated Petrol.....	110
Figure 7.10	The Relationship between Type of Mat used in the Known History Study and Initial Background Chromatographic Profile.....	112
Figure 7.11	Chromatographic Profile of Known History Study Control Sample 575 before and after a Three Month Time Period.....	113
Figure 7.12	Final Chromatographic Profiles of Known History Study Control Sample 575 and Known History Study Control Sample 580 (black) after a Three Month Time Period.....	114
Figure 7.13	Globus Arson Bag Chromatographic Profile – High Intensity.....	115
Figure 7.14	Globus Arson Bag Chromatographic Profile – Extracted Ion Chromatogram.....	115
Figure 7.15	Chromatographic Profiles of Known History Study Control Sample 576 before and after a Three Month Time Period.....	116

Figure 7.16	The Relationship between Average Fuel Entry per Week and the Presence of New Compounds for the Preliminary Known History Study.....	119
Figure 7.17	Number of Major Known History Study Samples per Number of New Compounds Observed after the Designated Insertion Period.....	120
Figure 7.18	Chromatographic Profile of Control Mat KS580 before and after a Period of Three Months.....	124
Figure 7.19	Relationship between the Mat's Insertion Position in the Vehicle and the Number of New Products for the Major Known History Study....	126
Figure 7.20	Relationship between the Average Number of Fuel Entries per Week and the Presence of New Compounds.....	128
Figure 7.21	Relationship between Number of New Compounds and the Length of Insertion Period.....	129
Figure 7.22	Chromatographic Profile of Mat 74, After Insertion For 3 Weeks, and Mirror Image Chromatogram of Mat 74 Background Before Insertion.....	130
Figure 7.23	Chromatographic profile of Mat 9, after insertion for 4 weeks, and mirror image Chromatogram of mat 9 background before insertion...	131
Figure 7.24	Chromatographic profile of Mat 75, after insertion for 6 weeks, and mirror image Chromatogram of mat 75 background.....	132
Figure 7.25	Chromatographic Profile of Mat KS567 Before and After Insertion for a Period of 3½ Months.....	135
Figure 7.26	Extracted Ion Chromatograms Comparing Chromatographic Profiles of Known History Study Car Mat 567 with 50% Evaporated Petrol...	136

Chapter 8

Figure 8.1	Chromatographic Profiles of Fresh (KC168A) and 99% (KC157A) Evaporated Unleaded Petrol.....	142
Figure 8.2	Chromatographic Profile of Mat 82 Background Volatiles.....	143
Figure 8.3	Chromatograms Illustrating the Decrease in Background Interference in Sydney Persistence Study Samples (0 µL petrol) after 1 day, 1 week and 1 month.....	144
Figure 8.4	Background Chromatographic Profile of Mats used in Darwin Persistence Study.....	145

Figure 8.5	Background Chromatographic Profile of Polycotton/Polypropylene Acoustic Felt used in Darwin Persistence Study.....	146
Figure 8.6	Background Chromatographic Profile of Polycotton/Polyester Acoustic Felt used in Darwin Persistence Study.....	146
Figure 8.7	Chromatograms Illustrating the Decrease in Background Interference in Darwin Persistence Study Samples (0 μ L petrol) after 1 day and 1 week.....	147
Figure 8.8	Background Profile of Dress Shoe used in Transfer Study.....	148
Figure 8.9	Background Profile of Sport Shoe used in Transfer Study.....	148
Figure 8.10	Chromatograms Illustrating the Varying Intensity of Initial Background Profiles of Transfer and Persistence Study Samples.....	149
Figure 8.11	Changes in Background Interference in Transfer and Persistence Study Samples (0 μ L petrol) after 1 day (TS051) and 1 week (TS073), Compared to the Initial Profile (TS004).....	150
Figure 8.12	Chromatogram of Persistence Sample 1G (Mat 80, 100 μ L petrol, 1 day).....	151
Figure 8.13	Extracted Ion Chromatograms Comparing the Evaporation Level of Petrol on Persistence Sample 1G to that of 75% and 90% Evaporated Petrol.....	152
Figure 8.14	Chromatogram of Persistence Sample 1h (Mat 82, 100 μ L petrol, 1 day).....	153
Figure 8.15	Chromatogram of 60% Evaporated Petrol, and mirror image of Persistence Sample 1H (mat 82, 100 μ L petrol, 1 day).....	154
Figure 8.16	Extracted Ion Chromatograms of Sample 1H (top) and 75% Evaporated Petrol.....	155
Figure 8.17	Chromatogram of Persistence Sample 2.16 (Carpet, 5000 μ L Petrol, 1 Week), Showing a Chromatographic Profile Greater than that of 75% Evaporated Petrol.....	158
Figure 8.18	Chromatogram of Persistence Sample 2.18b (padding, 5000 μ L Petrol, 1 week), showing a Late Area of Interference.....	159
Figure 8.19	Chromatogram of Transfer Sample 62 (5000 μ L Petrol, 1 Day), Showing a Chromatographic Profile Greater than that of 75% Evaporated Petrol.....	163

Publications and Presentations

Publications

Cavanagh K, Du Pasquier E and Lennard, C. *Background interference from car carpets the evidential value of of petrol residues in cases of suspected vehicle arson*. Forensic Science International (2002), 125(1), 22-36

Cavanagh K, Du Pasquier E, Roux C and Lennard C. *The Transfer and Persistence of Petrol on Car Carpets*. Forensic Science International (2005), 147(1), 71-79

Supervised Research

Hancock, M, *The Occurrence of Petrol on Car Boots*. Honours Thesis, UTS 2007. Supervised by Roux, C, Speers, N and Cavanagh-Steer, K

Conference Presentations

March 28 - April 2 2004 Wellington, New Zealand
The 17th International Symposium on the Forensic Sciences
• Awarded Best Poster in Section

Sept 22 – Sept 27 2003 Istanbul, Turkey
3rd European Academy of Forensic Science Triennial Meeting
• Workshop presenter

Sept 2 – Sept 27 2002 Montpellier, France
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Sept 16 – Sept 21 2001 Melbourne, VIC
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Abstract

The significance of the presence of petrol in motor vehicle fires has been challenged due to the possibility of a natural occurrence of petrol residues inside the vehicle. This study was undertaken to investigate the background levels of petrol on carpet in motor vehicles, and the potential transfer and persistence of petrol onto vehicle carpets through the 'normal' usage of motor vehicles.

The research was conducted via three studies: transfer and persistence studies were conducted to determine the transfer, evaporation and persistence of unleaded petrol on carpet; a known history study was conducted by the insertion of carpet mats into vehicles, for up to six months, with subsequent analysis for the presence of petrol; an unknown history study was conducted via the analysis of 300 carpet or carpet mat samples from vehicles, both before and after burning.

The results indicate that: small volumes of petrol are unlikely to be detected on carpet after 24 hours, and; only a small proportion of motor vehicles will exhibit the presence of petrol, in their original state, and then as evaporated petrol. None of the samples were found to contain petrol after burning.

These results demonstrate the significance of finding a large volume of fresh or slightly evaporated petrol on car carpet. As only trace levels are generally found without good reason, this may indicate the intentional addition of petrol to the vehicle interior.